

# Counterinsurgent Campaign Planning

STEVEN METZ

A frightening contradiction dominates the counterinsurgent environment: there is little indication that US skill in this type of conflict has grown as rapidly as the strategic relevance of insurgency. This dangerous gap between capabilities and the extent of the threat, which first became evident during counterinsurgency's post-Vietnam Dark Ages, can be traced to a number of factors. Among the most pressing is the lack of a coherent planning process to link strategic, operational, and tactical responses and bring order to the erratic, ad hoc way that the United States currently approaches counterinsurgency. Mao, who knew that "without planning, victories in guerrilla warfare are impossible," remains unheeded.<sup>1</sup>

Since planning tools abound, the logical explanation for the lack of a counterinsurgent planning process is the misallocation of responsibility among government agencies. Presently the State Department, acting through ambassador-led country teams, has the lead role in counterinsurgency. But the State Department is, by nature, weak at long-range strategic planning.<sup>2</sup> State's *raison d'être* is negotiation; the skills it cultivates are not those of the strategist—as John le Carré observed, "In diplomacy nothing lasts, nothing is absolute, a conspiracy to murder is no grounds for endangering the flow of conversation." Given this institutional *zeitgeist*, diplomats are singularly ill-equipped to plan the integrated and sustained application of national power.

Clearly, then, some other agency must step forward, develop a method for coherent planning, and vigorously champion it in the bureaucratic morass that often surrounds counterinsurgency. The Army, which has given the most attention to the development of coherent planning methods for the orderly application of resources in conflict, is the logical choice for such an

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initiative. The objective should be the application of campaign planning to counterinsurgency.

While the recent attention given campaign planning by the Army is healthy, nearly all of the effort has focused on the conventional Fulda Gap type of conflict; the architects of campaign planning have shied away from the bureaucratic and strategic complexities of counterinsurgency.<sup>3</sup> As a result, campaign planning in its present form is not directly applicable to counterinsurgency. Adaptation is required. The sooner such a process begins, the sooner American ineptitude at counterinsurgency can be transcended.

### *Adapting the Structure*

Similarities between conventional warfighting and counterinsurgency allow campaign planning to be adapted.<sup>4</sup> In both environments, the objective is a rigorous, coherent, rational method for the application of resources in pursuit of national interests. In both, the goal of planning is to expand control of the conflict—to integrate diverse factors and phase actions into the medium-term future.

There are, however, key differences vital to the planner. Most striking is a variation in the basic nature of victory. While political objectives are preeminent in both conflict environments—the Clausewitzian imperative still holds—in counterinsurgency the defeat of enemy armed forces does not automatically lead to the attainment of the political objective. Instead, the key is eradication of conditions conducive to violence and instability. In all cases, political, psychological, and economic methods must be fully integrated with military force. As Frank Kitson has noted, “Insurgency is not primarily a military activity.”<sup>5</sup> Thus the symbolic impact and psychological message of every use of force is equal to or greater than the tangible and direct effect.

While differences between the conventional and counterinsurgent environments are substantial, the essential logic holds.<sup>6</sup> Even the format could be similar (see Figure 1). Certain factors, however, take on added importance, or at least importance of a different kind.

The function of strategic guidance is one example. As with all campaigns, a counterinsurgent campaign must take place within an overarching strategic framework. A campaign planner must negotiate “a tangled map of military crossroads imposed on political intersections.”<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, it

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**Figure 1: Counterinsurgent Campaign Plan  
Suggested Format**

- STRATEGIC GUIDANCE
  - Strategic Vision
  - Strategic Objective
  - Strategic Constraints
- SITUATION
  - Political
  - Military
  - Economic
  - Social
- OPERATIONS
  - Phase 1 through Phase n
- COMMAND, CONTROL, AND LIAISON
  - US Military
  - Military-Civilian
  - US-Allied
- CAMPAIGN FORCE REQUIREMENTS
- RISKS
- PLANNING CRITERIA
  - US Doctrine
  - US National Security and Military Strategy
  - Principles of Counterinsurgency
  - Allied Strategy

is easy to lose sight of the global or theater perspective in counterinsurgency; country-specific campaigns have been the rule rather than the exception.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, *strategic vision* in both a global and theater sense is vital. To construct a strategy, the United States must have a clear notion of what we want the world in general, and the Third World in particular, to look like in the future—as Fred C. Iklé has noted, “Those who aim for nothing are guaranteed to hit it.”<sup>9</sup> Currently we have no strategic vision for the Third World and thus no global strategy for low-intensity conflict.<sup>10</sup>

Strategic constraints—which always affect a campaign plan—are even more pressing in counterinsurgency. Most important, the global range of American interests and commitments limits our ability to devote resources to any given conflict. Gone are the days when a John Kennedy could pledge the United States to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship,

support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty." Furthermore, public and congressional opinion form a lurking brake on counterinsurgent activity, often proscribing the use of the American military or weakening support for allied regimes perceived as oppressive or corrupt. In most cases, the campaign planner has no control over strategic constraints, but must carefully consider them when selecting methods of US support for an ally, the timing of the plan, and even the insurgencies within a theater that require American action.

Counterinsurgent campaign planning places heavy demands on the analytical ability of the planner. At the strategic level he must identify relevant US interests and usable elements of national power. This includes establishing a priority among competing national interests and developing sensitivity to the inherent advantages and disadvantages of each element of national power. At the operational level, the campaign planner must identify the source and causes of instability in the region and country, the viability and worthiness of the government in the country facing insurgency, and the nature of the insurgency itself. This requires understanding the essential nature of the society in which the insurgency exists. The campaign planner, in other words, must be part sociologist, part historian, and part political scientist—difficult tasks for officers schooled only in conventional warfighting.

In a deviation from conventional campaign planning, where the mission precedes all other aspects of planning, in counterinsurgency the mission is largely derived from the analysis of the situation. American objectives in a counterinsurgent conflict will always include stability and the promotion of democracy, human rights, and free enterprise; they may include protection of basing rights, access to resources, and investments. But all of this does not automatically imply that the mission of US forces is unqualified support of the government and full and total defeat of the insurgents.

As the United States slowly transcends its high Cold War, Manichaean view of the world and recognizes that any victory in insurgency that leaves the root causes of conflict unchanged is a chimera, reconciliation may become the primary objective of counterinsurgency. To seek the full defeat of the insurgents was a natural goal when strategy was based on the experience of World War II, but in a constrained conflict where the United States is unwilling or unable to pay the costs of massive involvement, American power should be used to bring settlement on favorable terms. In any case, the decision to seek full defeat of the insurgents or reconciliation should be guided by the analysis of the root causes of conflict, the American interests at stake, and, most important, the goals of the insurgents.

Mirroring a conventional campaign, operations in counterinsurgency form phased steps promoting attainment of the strategic objective. The plan should specify details of the first phase and a broad outline of subsequent phases, allowing for branches and sequels in response to various contingencies.

Each phase should be composed of operational objectives, tasks, and requirements (see Figure 2). For all operational functions, establishing priorities is a key element of planning. Factors that influence this will again include the nature of the insurgency, available resources, and strategic considerations such as the sense of urgency. Whatever the priority among objectives and tasks, the four tools of counterinsurgency—security assistance, intelligence, psychological operations, and civil affairs—should be fully integrated.

Clarifying command and control relationships is always a central task of campaign planning. What is unique to counterinsurgent campaign planning is the importance of a type of liaison relationship which occupies the hazy ground between traditional political liaisons and military command and control. These will link the military and civilian sectors of the US government as well as the militaries, police, intelligence services, and developmental agencies of the United States and the allied government. Because liaison relationships are less structured than command and control links and not based on doctrine, they require more careful planning in order to clarify channels of communication and levels of authority.

**Figure 2: Operational Phasing**  
**Phase 1 through Phase n**

- **OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES**
  - Political
  - Politico-economic
  - Politico-social
  - Politico-military
  - Politico-psychological
- **TASKS**
  - Separate the people from insurgent political cadres
  - Protect the people from insurgent military forces
  - Defeat insurgent forces
- **FUNCTIONS**
  - Neutralization
  - Security
  - Balanced development
  - Social mobilization
- **REQUIREMENTS**
  - Security assistance (funds and managers)
  - Intelligence
  - Psychological operations
  - Civil affairs

Risk assessment is vital for campaign planning. In counterinsurgency, strategic risks include the damage to US interests and prestige around the world that would accrue from failure or from association with an incompetent, brutal, or corrupt allied government; and the dangers of escalation if the insurgency turns into a superpower proxy confrontation. Most military planners feel more comfortable with the assessment of tactical risks, yet counterinsurgent planning requires the full integration of the strategic perspective.

### *The Planning Process*

Counterinsurgent planning must be CINC-oriented, but also inter-agency. This demands the education of civilian participants in the merits and methods of a campaign-planning approach to conflict; regular coordination during the plan development, assessment, and revision processes; and clear procedures for passing primary responsibility from civilian agencies to the military if the insurgency reaches that level of military intensity.

A number of criteria should guide the planner, including the US national security strategy, US military strategy, US doctrine, allied strategy, the allied national plan, and the principles of counterinsurgent conflict. US national security and national military strategies are certainly preeminent planning criteria. While the planner must sometimes piece together and interpret various indicators of these strategies, solid sources of guidance include the annual *National Security Strategy of the United States*, *Defense Guidance*, the annual reports to Congress by the Secretary of Defense, and applicable National Security Decision Directives. The next criterion should be the CINC's theater strategy. Equally important are US doctrine for low-intensity conflict, counter-guerrilla war, psychological operations, civil affairs, and other appropriate functions. Also vital—and often overlooked as planning criteria—are the national counterinsurgency plan and the military strategy of the allied government. Finally, a version of the traditional principles of war, adapted to the counterinsurgent environment through focus on the political and psychological dimensions of the struggle and the problems of interagency and alliance relationships, can assist the campaign planner (see Figure 3).

### *Conclusions*

Campaign planning can provide a logical, rigorous, and coherent method for linking understanding of the low-intensity conflict milieu and the actual application of all elements of American power in pursuit of national interests. It can ease the problems associated with force planning for counterinsurgency and provide a verifiable rationale for resource requests. Campaign planning, through proper modification, can unify the logics of low-intensity conflict and mid-intensity conflict while allowing the officer adept in conventional warfighting to more quickly adapt to counterinsurgency. Finally,

### **Figure 3: Principles of Counterinsurgent Conflict**

- **LEGITIMACY**  
All actions should seek to eradicate the sources of violence and instability. In most cases this requires augmenting the legitimacy of the host nation government and eroding the legitimacy of the insurgents.
- **OBJECTIVE**  
Every operation should be directed toward a clearly defined and attainable political objective.
- **OFFENSIVE**  
Seize, retain, and exploit the political initiative.
- **ECONOMY OF VIOLENCE**  
Attain political objectives with the minimum of violence.
- **UNITY OF EFFORT**  
All efforts, whether military, political, or economic, should be under unified control and should support one another.
- **SECURITY**  
Never permit the enemy to acquire an unexpected political advantage.
- **SIMPLICITY**  
Prepare clear, uncomplicated plans and clear, concise orders to insure thorough understanding.
- **SUPPORT**  
US efforts should be in support of the host nation strategy.
- **INTELLIGENCE**  
Information is the cornerstone of counterinsurgency, so no operation should proceed without substantial intelligence.

campaign planning for counterinsurgency can clarify the link between national interests and the application of power; through organization in phases, it can drive home that counterinsurgency is not a short-term contingency operation and thus lessen the adverse political effects growing from the protractedness of low-intensity conflict.

Even given these obvious benefits, serious obstacles remain to the adoption of counterinsurgent campaign planning. One of the most pressing is the bifurcated and transitional nature of planning responsibility. By the time the



military assumes the lead role from the State Department, an insurgency has passed the point where a politically and economically constrained United States can deal with it. Since it is the military that is closest to having a rigorous and coherent method for planning counterinsurgent campaigns, this means that such planning methods are likely to be used only in futile situations, thus eroding confidence in the planning methodology. Simply put, it does not matter how rational and coherent the military's method of planning for counterinsurgency is so long as the State Department and CIA do not subscribe.

A second obstacle is the "enemy within." In this case the culprit is not a communist infiltrator, but rather the ossification that too often dominates Army thinking. Part of this manifests itself as what Andrew Krepinevich called the "Army concept" for the application of military power.<sup>11</sup> This is derived from and oriented toward conventional, mid-intensity conflict against the Soviets or Soviet-style forces. Successful counterinsurgency planning requires transcendence of the Army concept. It demands thinking broadly in two dimensions. Vertically, the planner must integrate country plans into theater and global strategies; horizontally he must penetrate the mental walls that separate the use of military force from economic, political, and psychological power.

These obstacles are serious, but not insurmountable. The solution to the bifurcation of planning into civilian and military methodologies is, obviously, a unified method operative from the initiation of American involvement to its conclusion. This, in turn, is contingent on organizational clarity.

Historical models of close civil-military cooperation in counterinsurgency exist. For example, in the Malayan Emergency commencing in 1948, General Sir Gerald Templar became the first military man to be named British High Commissioner. To encourage even greater integration, Lieutenant General Sir Harold Briggs, a retired officer considered an expert in jungle warfare, was appointed civilian director of counterinsurgent operations in 1950. Working immediately under the High Commissioner, he was able to coordinate the activities of the military, police, and government.<sup>12</sup>

For the United States the key model is the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program instituted in Vietnam in 1967.<sup>13</sup> This program fully integrated military and civilian efforts under a combined authority at all levels. The relationship was one of true equality: some regions had a military director with a civilian aide, other regions had the reverse. Rather than the method of transitional responsibility that exists today, a global or theater CORDS-type program should be constructed. While this degree of civil-military integration would radically alter the role of the CINCs, it would also facilitate campaign planning while there is still time enough in the gestation of an insurgency to tip the scales with reasonable levels of American involvement.

Even if no integrated theater-level authority is created, thinking of counterinsurgency from a campaign-planning perspective still has advantages.

In collective decisionmaking and planning situations such as the ambassador-led interagency country team, the best-prepared participant often plays a major role in structuring the planning process. Thus if the uniformed officer on a country team has given the most extensive thought to coherent methods of counterinsurgent planning and brings well-developed planning tools to meetings, he will strongly influence the group planning process. And, more important, counterinsurgent campaign planning could stress the integrated use of all elements of national power.

Overcoming the mid-intensity mind-set within the Army is both feasible and difficult. Consideration must, however, be given to critics who argue that it may be impossible to have a single officer corps adept at both mid-intensity conflict and low-intensity conflict.<sup>14</sup> If this is true, the only solution may be the creation of a dedicated low-intensity conflict force. But given the serious implications of such a radical step, the immediate task of the Army is to cultivate a true understanding of the Third World and counterinsurgent environments in the officer corps.

The need for a coherent method of planning for counterinsurgency exists. So too does a usable model. All that is missing is the effort and initiative to make the adaptations required for the development of an effective counterinsurgent planning tool.

#### NOTES

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13. See Thomas W. Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington: US Army Center of Military History, 1982); and James K. McCollum, "The CORDS Pacification Organization in Vietnam: A Civilian-Military Effort," *Armed Forces and Society*, 10 (Fall 1983), 105-22.

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